

Making Sense of Mackerel

The Gulf of Mexico and South Atlantic Fisheries Management Councils regulate Spanish and king mackerel through the joint Coastal Migratory Pelagics Fisheries Management Plan (FMP). Two migratory groups, Gulf of Mexico and South Atlantic, are recognized for each species and regulated separately. These fish travel long distances and may move between the two water bodies. In general, mackerel live farther north in the summer and farther south in the winter.

Proposed migratory patterns

Researchers have some idea about the movements of king mackerel in the Gulf and Atlantic through tagging studies. In the Gulf, king mackerel are believed to spend summer in the northern Gulf, in waters near the mouth of the Mississippi. In fall, they migrate south in two separate groups; one group migrates east and south along the Florida coast, and the other group migrates west and south along the Texas coast. The eastern group spends the winter in south Florida, and many individuals move into the Atlantic along the east coast of Florida. The western group moves to waters off southern Texas, and some portion may move into Mexican waters off the Yucatan peninsula.

Unfortunately, little data are available from this area. In the spring both groups migrate back north to their spawning grounds. In the Atlantic, king mackerel show a similar migratory pattern but only one group exists. This group spends summers in the northern part of the Atlantic and winters in the southern part of the Atlantic. Thus in winter, Gulf group and Atlantic group king mackerel co-occur in waters off the east coast of Florida. Because Gulf group king mackerel are more vulnerable to fishing pressure, this area is managed under Gulf group regulations during the winter.

Spanish mackerel

The area of the Gulf migratory group Spanish mackerel extends from the southern border of Texas throughout the Gulf to the Miami-Dade/Monroe county border on the east coast of Florida. The commercial and recreational annual catch limit (quota) in this area is 5.150 million pounds (mp). The fishing year is April 1 through March 31, and there are no trip limits.

The Atlantic migratory group Spanish mackerel fishing year is March 1 through the end of February. The area for this group is divided into northern and southern zones; the quota is 3.13 mp for both zones combined, and is adjusted to 2.88 mp. The adjustment is made to allow the southern zone fishery to remain open longer by saving a reserve of 250,000 pounds that can be fished at a low level after the adjusted quota is reached. In the southern zone, the fishing year begins March 1. Currently, the trip limit is 3,500 pounds starting March 1, and then starting December 1 trips are not limited. The unlimited period continues until 75% of the adjusted quota is landed, after which the trip limit is 1,500 pounds. When 100% of the adjusted quota is reached, the trip limit is reduced to 500 pounds until the end of the fishing year or the full quota is met. In the North zone, the trip limit is 3,500 pounds year-round because most mackerel have moved south before 75% of the adjusted quota is reached.

King mackerel

The Gulf migratory group of king mackerel is divided into Western and Eastern zones. The Western zone extends from the southern border of Texas to the Alabama/Florida state line. The fishing year is July 1 through June 30 with a trip limit of 3,000 pounds. The quota is 1,180,480 pounds.

The Eastern zone, which includes only waters off of Florida, is divided into subzones. The East Coast subzone is from the Flagler/Volusia county line south to the Miami-Dade/Monroe county line and only exists from November 1 through March 31 when king mackerel migrate into that area. During the rest of the year, mackerel in that area are considered part of the Atlantic migratory group. The quota for the East Coast Gulf migratory group is 1,215,228 pounds with a trip limit of 50 fish until February 1. After February 1, the trip limit changes to 75 fish if 75% of the quota has not been taken.

The west coast of Florida, from the Alabama/Florida state line to the Monroe/Dade county line, is divided into North and South subzones at the Lee/Collier county line. The quota is 197,064 pounds in the North region and 1,215,228 pounds in the South region (divided equally between the hook-and-line and gillnet sectors). The hook-and-line component of the fishery in both regions runs July 1 through June 30 with a 1,250-pound trip limit until 75% of the quota is reached, and then the trip limit is 500 pounds until the end of the fishing year. In the South region, the gillnet season opens on the day after the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday. The quota is equal to the hook-and-line quota at 607,614 pounds with a trip limit of 25,000 pounds. The fishing year ends June 30, but the quota is usually reached in two to three weeks.

The Atlantic migratory group has a quota of 3.88 mp and has a fishing year of March 1 through end of February. Different areas have different trip limits at different times of the year. From the Volusia/Flagler county line north through New York, the trip limit is 3,500 pounds year-round.

From April 1 until November 1, the trip limit in Volusia County is 3,500 pounds. From the Volusia/Brevard county line south to the Miami-Dade/Monroe county line, the trip limit is 75 fish until November 1. On November 1, both of these areas switch to be part of the Gulf group East Coast subzone and are under the trip limits described for that area. Monroe County (including the Florida Keys) is also part of the Atlantic group at the beginning of the season until November 1, then that area becomes part of the Gulf group West Coast subzone South region. The trip limit in Monroe County remains the same throughout the year at 1,250 pounds.